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Pentagon announces new international mission to counter attacks on commercial vessels in Red Sea

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR
Associated Press

MANAMA, Bahrain (AP) — The U.S. and a host of other nations are creating a new force to protect ships transiting the Red Sea that have come under attack by drones and ballistic missiles fired from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Tuesday in Bahrain. The seriousness of the attacks, several of which have damaged vessels, has led multiple shipping companies to order their ships to hold in place and not enter the Bab el-Mandeb Strait until the security situation can be addressed. The U.S. military's Central Command reported two more of the attacks on commercial vessels Monday. A strike by an attack drone and a ballistic missile hit a tanker off Yemen, at roughly the same time a cargo ship reported an explosive detonating in the water near them, the military said. "This is an international challenge that demands collective action," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement released just after midnight in Bahrain.



U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, rear, addresses members of an international maritime task force protecting commercial ships in the Red Sea at U.S. Navy Central Command headquarters in Manama, Bahrain, Tuesday, Dec. 19, 2023.

Continued on Page 2

Associated Press

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Pentagon announces new international mission to counter attacks on commercial vessels in Red Sea

Continued from Front

"Therefore today I am announcing the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian, an important new multinational security initiative." There are about 400 commercial vessels transiting the southern Red Sea, an area roughly the size of Washington D.C. to Boston, at any given time, a senior military official told reporters who are traveling with Austin in the region.

Under the new mission, the military ships will not necessarily escort a specific vessel, but will be positioned to provide umbrella protection to as many as possible at a given time, the official said on the condition of anonymity to provide additional details not made public on how the new operation will work.

Mohammed Abdel-Salam, the Houthis' chief negotiator and spokesman, challenged the U.S.-created coalition on Tuesday, saying the Iranian-backed rebels would continue targeting Israel-linked vessels off Yemen.

"The American-formed coalition is to protect Israel and militarize the sea without any justification, and will not stop Yemen from continuing its legitimate operations in support of Gaza," he wrote on social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

He said the Houthis' attacks "are not a show of force nor a challenge to anyone,"



U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin makes a joint statement with Israel Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant, after their meeting about Israel's military operation in Gaza, in Tel Aviv, Israel, Monday, Dec. 18, 2023.

adding, "Whoever seeks to expand the conflict must bear the consequences of his actions."

On Tuesday the shipping company Maersk announced that for now, it had decided to reroute its ships that have been paused for days outside the strait and Red Sea, and send them around Africa through the Cape of Good Hope instead — a much longer and less efficient passage. Maersk said it welcomed the international security effort, but at the present time, the much longer route would provide "more predictable outcomes" for its customers.

In the last four weeks, Houthi

militants have attacked or seized commercial ships 12 times and still hold 25 members of the MV Galaxy Leader hostage in Yemen, Austin said in remarks Tuesday in a ministerial meeting on the new maritime mission. The U.S. is still actively seeking member countries to join the mission, and increase the number of navies present and participating.

The United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain have joined the new maritime security mission, Austin said. Some of those countries will conduct joint patrols while others provide

intelligence support in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

One notably absent participant is China, which has warships in the region, but those ships have not responded to previous calls for assistance by commercial vessels, even though some of the ships attacked have had ties to Hong Kong, the military official said. Several other countries have also agreed to be involved in the operation but prefer not to be publicly named, a defense official said on the condition of anonymity to discuss additional details of the new mission that have not been publicly announced.

The new maritime security mission will be coordinated by the already existing Combined Task Force 153, which was set up in April 2022 to improve maritime security in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden.

While the task force has primarily provided a headquarters structure to date, the goal of the new mission is to provide ships and other assets to carry out the protection. There have been 39 member nations in CTF 153, but officials were working to determine which of them would participate in this latest effort.

Separately, the United States has also called on the United Nations Security Council to take action against the attacks.

In a letter to council members obtained Monday by The Associated Press, U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said Houthi attacks targeting commercial vessels legally transiting the international waterways continue to threaten "navigational rights and freedoms, international maritime security, and international commerce."

The 15 council members discussed the Houthi threat behind closed doors Monday but took no immediate action. Two U.S. warships — the USS Carney and the USS Mason, Navy destroyers — are currently moving through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to help deter and respond to attacks from the Houthis. □

Associated Press

Biden administration moves to protect old-growth forests as climate change brings fires, pests

By **MATTHEW BROWN**
Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Biden administration moved on Tuesday to conserve groves of old-growth trees on national forests across the U.S. and limit logging as climate change amplifies the threats they face from wildfires, insects and disease. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the agency was adopting an “ecologically-driven” approach to older forests — an arena where timber industry interests have historically predominated. That will include the first nationwide amendment to U.S. Forest Service management plans in the agency’s 118-year history, he said.

The proposal follows long-standing calls from environmentalists to preserve older forests that offer crucial wildlife habitat and other environmental benefits. Timber companies have fought against logging restrictions on government-owned lands.

President Joseph Biden’s administration appears to be aiming for a middle ground: It would sharply limit commercial timber harvests in old-growth forests while allowing logging to continue in “mature forests” that have not yet reached old-growth stage. “This creates a commitment to resiliency, a commitment to restore and protect the existing old growth that we have from the threats that we see,” Vilsack said in an interview. Timber industry representatives said Tuesday’s proposal would give its opponents new leverage to file legal challenges against logging projects that are intended to reduce wildfire risks for communities near forests. But environmental groups called for logging restrictions to be extended even further and include mature forests, which cover more than 100,000 square miles (275,000 square miles) of forest service land, about three times the area of old growth.

Old-growth forests, such as the storied giant sequoia stands of northern California, have layer upon layer of undisturbed trees and vegetation. There’s wide consensus on the importance of preserving them — both symbolically as marvels of nature, and more practically because their trunks and branches store large amounts of carbon that can be released when forests burn, adding to climate change.

Underlining the urgency of the issue are wildfires that killed thousands of giant sequoias in recent years. The towering giants are concentrated in about 70 groves scattered along the western side of the Sierra Nevada range.

Many old-growth forests fell during the second half of the 20th century during aggressive logging on national forests. Others were cut earlier as the U.S. developed.

Logging volumes dropped sharply over the past several decades, but the demise of older trees due to fire, insects and disease accelerated. More than 5,100 square miles (13,300 square kilometers) of old-growth and mature forests burned since 2000.

About 350 square miles (900 square kilometers) of older forests were logged on federal lands during that time, according to a recent government analysis.

There’s no simple formula to determine what’s old. Growth rates among different tree types vary greatly — and even within species, depending on their access to water and sunlight, and soil conditions. Groves of aspen can mature within a half-century. Douglas fir stands can take 100 years. Wildfire frequency also factors in: Ponderosa pine forests are adapted to withstand blazes as often as once a decade, compared to lodgepole pine stands that might burn every few hundred years.

Past protections for older trees have come indirectly,

such as the 2001 “roadless rule” adopted under former President Bill Clinton that effectively blocked logging on about one quarter of all federal forests.

Chris Wood, president of Trout Unlimited and a former Forest Service policy chief who worked on the roadless rule, said the Biden administration proposal was a “step in the right direction” to protect the remaining old growth.

“This is the first time the Forest Service has said its national policy will be to protect old growth,” he said. Timber companies and some members of Congress have been skeptical about Biden’s ambitions to



Old-growth Douglas fir trees stand along the Salmon River Trail, June 25, 2004, in Mt. Hood National Forest outside Zigzag, Ore. Associated Press

protect older forests, which the Democrat launched in 2021 on Earth Day. They’ve urged the administration to instead concentrate on lessening wildfire dangers

by thinning stands of trees where decades of wildfire suppression allowed undergrowth to flourish, which can be a recipe for disaster when fires ignite. □

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Groups sue over new Texas law that lets police arrest migrants who enter the U.S. illegally



Migrants wait to climb over concertina wire after they crossed the Rio Grande and entered the U.S. from Mexico, Saturday, Sept. 23, 2023, in Eagle Pass, Texas.

Associated Press

By **ACACIA CORONADO**
Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Civil rights organizations on Tuesday filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of a new Texas law that would allow police to arrest

migrants who cross the border illegally and permit local judges to order them to leave the country.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Austin, argues that the measure that is set to take effect in March is un-

constitutional because the federal government has sole authority over immigration.

The American Civil Liberties Union, its Texas branch, and the Texas Civil Rights Project sued less than 24 hours after Republican Gov. Greg Abbott signed the measure during a ceremony on the U.S.-Mexico border in Brownsville.

The civil rights groups filed the lawsuit on behalf of El Paso County and two immigrant aid groups seeking to block enforcement of the measure, known as SB 4, and declare it unlawful.

"S.B. 4 creates a new state system to regulate immigration that completely bypasses and conflicts with the federal system," the lawsuit states.

The lawsuit was filed against

the head of the Texas Department of Public Safety, whose troopers could arrest migrants, and the El Paso County district attorney, whose office would potentially prosecute cases in that border community. A DPS spokesperson declined to comment in an email Tuesday, citing the pending litigation. A person who answered the phone in Hicks' office said he was not available and had no immediate comment.

Abbott and other Texas Republicans who support the measure say President Joe Biden isn't doing enough to control the 1,950-mile (3,149-kilometer) southern border. "In his absence, Texas has the constitutional authority to secure our border through historic laws like SB 4," Abbott said in an

email Tuesday, adding that he was willing to take the case to the Supreme Court. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre criticized the law, but wouldn't say whether the Justice Department would also challenge it.

"This is an extreme law that will not and does not make the communities in Texas safer," Jean-Pierre said. She added that the purpose of the law was to "demonize immigrants and also dehumanize immigrants" and said "communities should not be individually targeted and put into harm's way."

According to Tuesday's lawsuit, DPS Director Steve McGraw told lawmakers that his agency estimates approximately 72,000 arrests will be made each year under the measure. □

South dominates U.S. population gains as deaths drop

By **MIKE SCHNEIDER**
Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — South Carolina and Florida were the two fastest-growing states in the U.S., as the South dominated population gains in 2023, and the U.S. growth rate ticked upward slightly from the depths of the pandemic due to a drop in deaths, according to estimates released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The United States added 1.6 million people, of which more than two-thirds came from international migration. The half percent growth rate was a slight uptick from the 0.4% growth rate last year and the less than 2% increase in 2021.

The growth rate "is an uptick from the pandemic but still low by historical standards," said William Frey, a demographer at The Brookings Institution.

Population gains or losses come from births outpacing deaths, or vice versa, and migration.

There were about 300,000 fewer deaths this year compared with a year earlier. That helped double the



The Miami skyline is viewed from the Rickenbacker Causeway in South Florida, Dec. 15, 2023.

Associated Press

natural increase to more than 500,000 people in 2023. However, it was the 1.1 million immigrants who drove population gains in the U.S. this year, according to estimates that measure change from mid-2022 to mid-2023.

"Ultimately, fewer deaths paired with rebounding immigration resulted in the

nation experiencing its largest population gain since 2018," said Kristie Wilder, a Census Bureau demographer.

The vast majority of growth, 87%, came from the South, a region the Census Bureau defines as stretching from Texas to Maryland and Delaware.

South Carolina's population

rose by more than 90,000 residents, resulting in a 1.7% growth rate that topped all other states. More than 90% of the growth came from domestic migration, or people moving from another U.S. state to South Carolina. Without domestic and international migration, the Palmetto State would have lost population

in 2023 since there were almost 1,300 more deaths than births.

Florida had the next highest growth rate at 1.6%, adding more than 365,000 residents. That was also the second-highest growth in terms of raw numbers. Only Texas surpassed it, gaining more than 473,000 people. Of the 50 states, New York had the biggest rate of population decline, losing 0.5%. It also recorded the largest decline in pure numbers, with a drop of almost 102,000 residents. It was a much smaller decline for the Empire State than last year's 180,000-person drop. California was still the nation's most populous state, with 38.9 million residents, though it lost more than 75,000 residents this year. The decline was an improvement from the more than 113,000-person drop last year. Texas was the second most populous state with 30.5 million residents. For the first time, Georgia, surpassed 11 million people in 2023, joining seven other states above that population threshold. □

U.N. Security Council in intense negotiations on Gaza humanitarian resolution, trying to avoid U.S. veto

By EDITH M. LEDERER

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) —

U.N. Security Council members were in intense negotiations Tuesday on an Arab-sponsored resolution to spur desperately needed humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza during some kind of a halt in the fighting, trying to avoid another veto by the United States.

The vote, initially scheduled for Monday afternoon, was postponed until Tuesday to try to get the U.S. to support the resolution or abstain. The vote had been expected to take place by early afternoon, but diplomats said it was pushed back until later in the day because the United States asked for more time. They spoke on condition of anonymity because the negotiations have been private.

State Department spokesman Matt Miller said the U.S. is still "engaging constructively" with other members of the council on the text, without giving any details. The draft resolution on the table Monday morn-



Palestinians unload wheat sacks from a humanitarian aid truck into a grocery store under guard by Hamas fighters in Rafah, Gaza Strip, Tuesday, Dec. 19, 2023.

Associated Press

ing called for an "urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities," but this language is expected to be watered down in a final draft, possibly to a "suspension" of hostilities or something weaker to get U.S. support, diplomats said.

A new draft circulated

early Tuesday "calls for the urgent suspension of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and for urgent steps towards a sustainable cessation of hostilities."

The U.S. on Dec. 8 vetoed a Security Council resolution backed by almost all oth-

er council members and dozens of other nations demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza. The 193-member General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a similar resolution on Dec. 12 by a vote of 153-10, with 23 abstentions.

In its first unified action on Nov. 15, with the U.S. abstaining, the Security Council adopted a resolution calling for "urgent and extended humanitarian pauses" in the fighting, unhindered aid deliveries to civilians and the unconditional release of all hostages.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog said during a briefing with ambassadors that Israel is "ready for another humanitarian pause and additional humanitarian aid in order to enable the release of hostages." But Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh of the United Arab Emirates, the Arab representative on the 15-member council, said Tuesday a new resolution had to go "a little bit further" than the Nov. 15 resolution. Security Council resolutions are important because they are legally binding, but in practice many parties choose to ignore the council's requests for action. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, though they are a significant barometer of world opinion. □

Turkey links Sweden's NATO bid to US approving F-16 jet sales and Canada lifting arms embargo

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) —

Ratification of Sweden's NATO membership by Turkey's parliament hinges on the U.S. Congress' approval of Turkey's request to purchase F-16 fighter jets, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said, calling on the two legislatures to act "simultaneously."

In comments reported on Tuesday, Erdogan also said Canada and other NATO allies must lift arms embargoes imposed on Turkey.

"Positive developments from the United States regarding the F-16 issue and Canada keeping its promises will accelerate our parliament's positive view on (Sweden's membership,)" Erdogan said. "All of these are linked."

He made the comments late Monday while returning from a visit to Hungary. Hungary and Turkey are

the only two NATO members not to have formally approved Sweden's bid to join the trans-Atlantic mili-



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during a joint statement with Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban at the Carmelite Monastery in Budapest, Hungary, Monday, Dec. 18, 2023.

Associated Press

tary alliance.

Erdogan's comments were reported by the state-run Anadolu Agency.

He told reporters that Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan raised the issue of a simultaneous approval by Turkey's parliament and Congress during discussions this week with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

"If we operate this simultaneously, we will have the opportunity to pass this through the parliament much more easily," Erdogan quoted Fidan as telling Blinken. Erdogan submitted a protocol on Sweden's admission to parliament in October, but the ratification process stalled.

The Turkish leader has since linked the matter to Con-

gress approving Turkey's request to purchase 40 F-16 fighter jets and kits to modernize its existing fleet.

Turkey has delayed ratification of Sweden's membership for more than a year. Ankara accuses the country of not taking Turkey's security concerns seriously enough, including its fight against Kurdish militants and other groups that Ankara considers to be security threats.

The delays have frustrated other NATO allies, who were swift to accept Sweden and Finland into the alliance after the neighboring countries dropped their longstanding military neutrality following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. □

A man claiming to be a former Russian officer wants to give evidence to the ICC about Ukraine crimes

By **MIKE CORDER**

Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands

(AP) — A Russian claiming to be a former officer with the Wagner Group has arrived in the Netherlands and says he wants to provide evidence to the International Criminal Court, which is investigating atrocities in the war in Ukraine.

Dutch news program EenVandaag reported Monday that Igor Salikov had flown into the Netherlands. The news show spoke to him via a videolink. He is believed to have applied for asylum and could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Salikov said he was in eastern Ukraine in 2014 when conflict erupted there, and in 2022 when Russia invaded its neighbor.

"I know where the orders came from," he told EenVandaag. His claims could not be independently verified.

The Wagner Group, a military contractor created by Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, deployed to eastern Ukraine when a Moscow-backed separatist rebellion erupted there in 2014. It also took part



A view of the exterior view of the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands, on March 31, 2021.

in Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, spearheading the battle for the eastern city of Bakhmut that was captured by Russian forces in May.

Prigozhin, who staged a brief mutiny in June when he sent Wagner mercenaries to march on Moscow demanding the ouster of top military leaders, was killed in an air crash in Au-

gust.

The ICC issued an international arrest warrant in March for Russian President Vladimir Putin, alleging that he was responsible for the abduction of children from Ukraine. Information about the Russian chain of command could be crucial in building more cases against senior Russians involved in the war.

In a written response, the court's prosecution office confirmed it received a written communication from Salikov but did not say whether investigators were talking with him.

"In line with the confidentiality of its activities, the office is unable to provide any further information with respect to ongoing investigations. In particular, the

office is unable to confirm or deny whether an individual is being engaged with as a potential witness or in any other capacity," the prosecution statement said.

Salikov also claims to have information about the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in 2014.

All 298 passengers and crew were killed when the plane was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, by a Russian missile system known as a Buk TELAR. A Dutch court convicted two Russians and a pro-Moscow Ukrainian rebel in November 2022 for their roles in downing the Amsterdam-Kuala Lumpur flight.

In February, the multinational Joint Investigation Team said it had uncovered "strong indications" that Putin approved the supply of heavy anti-aircraft weapons to Ukrainian separatists who shot down the plane.

However, the team said it had insufficient evidence to prosecute Putin or any other suspects, and it suspended its 8½-year inquiry. □

Associated Press

West accuses Iran of illegally testing missiles, transferring drones to Russia, enriching uranium

By **EDITH M. LEDERER**

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) —

The Western powers in the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran accused Tehran

on Monday of developing and testing ballistic missiles, transferring hundreds of drones to Russia, and enriching uranium to an unprecedented 60% level for a country without a nuclear weapons program all in violation of a U.N. resolution endorsing the deal.

Iran and its ally, Russia, dismissed the charges by Britain, France and Germany, strongly supported by the United States, which pulled out of the agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2018.

The six-party agreement was aimed at ensuring that Iran could not develop

atomic weapons. Under the accord, Tehran agreed to limit enrichment of uranium to levels necessary for the peaceful use of nuclear power in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

The sharp exchanges came at the Security Council's semi-annual meeting on the implementation of its resolution endorsing the 2015 nuclear deal.

Both Iran's U.N. Ambassador Amir Iravani and Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia blamed the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, Western sanctions and an "anti-Iran" stance for the

current standoff.

Iravani said Iran is allowed to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and Nebenzia rejected alleged evidence that it was using Iranian drones in Ukraine.

Then-President Donald Trump said when unilaterally pulling out of the accord in 2018 that he would negotiate a stronger deal, but that didn't happen. Iran began breaking the terms a year later and its 60% enrichment is near weapons-grade levels, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. nuclear watchdog. □



The sun sets behind the Palais Coburg, where closed-door nuclear talks on the revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) take place, in Vienna, Austria, on Aug. 5, 2022.
Associated Press



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Matividiri – One of the most entertaining vacation activities is a visit to the Ostrich Farm, a popular stopover on most island jeep tours.

Locals and visitors enjoy the guided ostrich tour at the farm and features a well-stocked locally crafted and produced Art Boutique. The highlight of the visit is always the fun interaction with the resident ostriches and emus, including a trip to the incubators and the bird kindergarten, housing baby ostriches, baby emus, chicken and ducks, and even a land turtle!

It was a National Geographic moment when on cue Mr. Ostrich flapped his wings excitedly and poked around the ground with his bill, triggering Mrs. Ostrich who ran around



in circles, flapped her wings and also poked around, before collapsing on the ground in a heap of feathers, allowing him to mount her, shaking, winding and spiraling his head in all direction!

Mr. Ostrich concluded his unexpected performance with a loud honking, his eyes rolling, then got up in a huff to nonchalantly strut away, leaving his wife and the scrutiny of our cameras.

It was a surprise reality TV moment, and not usually included in the regular program. Feeding the Ostriches is however always on the program, and they are eternally hungry, and fun!

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Po-kè Ono - A Taste of Asia with a Twist: Exploring Flavorful Fusion



Amidst the vibrant paradise of Aruba, where turquoise waters meet golden sands, a culinary gem awaits: Po-kè Ono, the coolest Asian fusion spot that will whisk you away on an exotic flavor adventure. Experience an explosion of Asian tastes like never before led by the creative genius of Chef Urvin Croes, the mastermind behind Aruba's acclaimed Infini restaurant. Po-kè Ono serves up an enticing menu that blends traditional Asian flavors with modern twists, all within a cheery ambiance that exudes warmth and tropical charm.

At Po-kè Ono, diners can savor an array of flavors from the new menu items that stand out for their artful presentation and delectable taste. One of the highlights is the traditional Vietnamese Pho, a soul-soothing soup consisting of bone broth, rice noodles, succulent thinly sliced meat, fresh herbs, and zesty spices, making it an explosion of taste in every spoonful.

Another must-try dish is The Elvis Presley Bao, a playful homage to the King of Rock 'n' Roll. This fun creation features fried spam with sweet teriyaki, peanut sauce,

crispy fried plantains, crisp lettuce, red onions, and a spicy kick from the Kewpie mayo. The combination of sweet, savory, and spicy flavors is a harmony that leaves guests coming back for more.

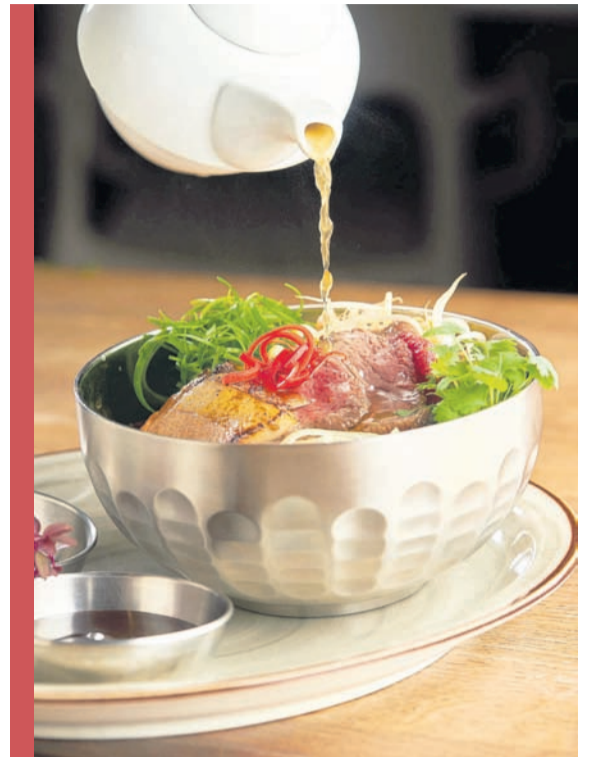
If you're craving a delicious fusion of Indonesian and Hawaiian influences, the Babi Sate Poke hits all the right notes. Indonesian-style pork skewers are served with rich peanut sauce, crunchy crispy onions, pickled cucumber, and creamy avocado, resulting in a medley of textures and flavors that captivate the palate.

Beyond the flavors, Po-kè Ono impresses with its thoughtfully curated ambiance that reflects the Asian fusion theme. With two locations in Renaissance Marketplace and the lobby of Azure Residence, the restaurant exudes a tropical and laid-back vibe, inviting guests to unwind and indulge in a delightful dining experience. The use of fun cocktail glasses and relaxed decor further enhances the sense of pleasure, making every visit a memorable one.

Get ready for double the fun at Po-kè Ono with their awesome two-for-one happy hour. From 4 pm to 6 pm, this fantastic deal lets you dive into selected items at an incredible value. It's the perfect opportunity to try out their fresh new menu while sipping on delightful beverages.

Meet the culinary maestro, Chef Urvin Croes, the creative force behind Po-kè Ono and Infini. With an unyielding passion for Asian cuisine, rooted in his Chinese heritage, he sprinkles his magic on every plate at Po-kè Ono, crafting innovative and artfully delicious dishes. Having honed his skills in top-notch hotel restaurants and even snatching the title of 'Iron Chef Aruba's first winner,' Chef Urvin's culinary expertise shines through in every mouthwatering bite.

Promoting Aruba as a culinary destination, Chef Urvin sources ingredients



locally whenever possible, supporting farmers who share his passion for quality produce. The result is a menu that expertly balances traditional recipes with modern techniques, elevating every dish to new heights. His love for food and the cultural stories behind each creation are evident in the passionate manner in which he prepares and presents his dishes.

Notably, Po-kè Ono has earned its well-deserved reputation as the number one restaurant on Tripadvisor Palm Beach, a testament to its success and popularity among locals and tourists alike.

Po-kè Ono is like a treasure trove of Asian fusion delights, all crafted with love and expertise by the one and only Chef Urvin Croes. You'll be treated to an array of dishes, from Pho to inventive Bao creations, each artfully presented. The relaxed ambiance and awesome two-for-one happy hour make dining here an absolute pleasure. Once you've tasted the magic of Po-kè Ono, you'll be coming back for more! So, what are you waiting for? Dive in and indulge in this captivating world of Asian-inspired goodness!

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Enjoy one of the best views on Aruba at the top of the Hooiberg Hill

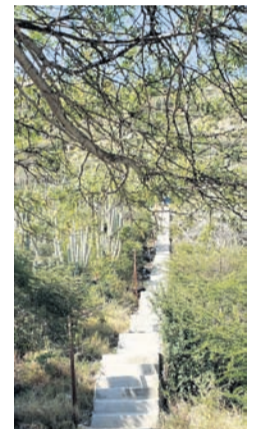
(Oranjestad)—If you are a regular hiker, or maybe want to spice up your morning work out session, then you might enjoy one of the most popular climbing sites on the island: The Hooiberg Hill. Accompanied with a 600-step staircase, this hill overlooks a great part of the island, the Caribbean sea, and sometimes even the Santa Anna mountain located in the coastal state of Falcon in Venezuela, providing one of the best views you can get on Aruba.

located at the center district of the island, Santa Cruz, the Hooiberg Hill is the second highest point on the island at 165 meters above sea level (or about 540 feet above sea level). The highest point is Jamanota Hill at 189 meters (620 feet), located in the Arikok National Park.

The staircase that run on the side of the hill was first built in 1951, when Mr. Eduardo Tromp constructed it. At that time, the staircase consisted of 900 steps. Over time, as the steps faced erosion, the

government decided to renovate these stairs in 1991. This new project delivered the newer staircase with only 587 steps. However, don't be fooled—it may still be a work out to get on top. In addition, there is now a gazebo placed halfway up the stair for a little rest. The view at this resting stop is also a sight to see.

The best time to climb the hill would be early in the morning or right before sunset, as it may not be as hot. However, the hill is of course open all day, every day. □



Fresh fish right out of the Caribbean Sea to your plate

ORANJESTAD – Fish restaurants are everywhere, but do they serve fresh fish daily right out of the Caribbean Sea? The Grand Fish Restaurant does. This locally-owned restaurant is situated merely 5 minutes from the strip and is open as early as 11am for the lunch lovers.

The minute you step inside you can feel the homey and cozy warm ambiance by the décor and the friendly staff who will receive you with open arms.

The Grand Fish Restaurant has an extraordinary menu starting with appetizers, salads and their famous fish soup. The entree dishes consist of a variety of fresh fish like whole red snapper, fish steak, fish cake, grilled salmon, mixed

seafood or seafood rice (paella local style) combined with sides of vegetables, french fries, rice, plantain, the island's traditional 'pan bati' (slapped bread) or funchi (cornmeal cake).

Each and every dish is made with passion, love and dedication. Yes... even the fried ones!

There are also pasta, meat and poultry options plus a kid-friendly menu with crispy chicken or fish nuggets, cheese burgers, mac & cheese and kid tenderloin.

Pair your meal with your favorite drink or cocktail, a wine of your choice or a glass of The Grand Fish yummy home-made fresh lemonade.



If you haven't visited The Grand Fish yet, check out our local page for a coupon for a free glass of wine and make sure to drop by. The staff will be happy to welcome, guide and serve you for an amazing casual bite and good time.

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Mangrove oysters

Episode CCXXXVII - 237

Each week, Etnia Nativa presents a new episode about cultural heritage, focusing on native knowledge, transcendental wisdom, and the importance of defending the true heart of Aruba. It connects the reader to that mystical aspect of the island's culture and traditions, encouraging everyone to interact with our unique environment.

During this episode, we will have it regarding Aruban oysters, which used to be part of a small island industry in the olden days.

The mangroves form a green barrier on the south coast of our island, transitional vegetation from land to sea that offers great protection and forms a unique ecosystem in its own right. These topics were explained in previous episodes (III-3 and CXXV-128). Despite the importance of mangroves as ecosystems and for the survival of certain communities around the world, in the last four decades, thousands of hectares of mangroves have been lost due to human actions such as deforestation, the changing climate, and industrial toxic waste waters.

The thickets of roots created by mangroves provide a natural barrier against the slings and arrows of extreme climate phenomena, allowing hundreds of families to subsist on what thrives in those forests, for example, the tradition of artisanal fishing in some places. If mangroves disappeared, it would be the end of the subsistence of many coastal regions around the world in which they are a source of life and biodiversity.

In the mangrove reserves, you can also collect mangrove oysters, which provide an important source of nutrition and income for many cultures. This practice used to be part of a small but very successful Aruban industry at the beginning of the 19th century. Unfortunately, it did not prosper since, at that time, the wood provided by the mangrove was way more important than the oysters that lived on its roots. Mangrove wood was used in the construction of forts in Curacao, and the mangroves where oysters grew were especially



suitable for the burning of lime. Mangroves were not only cut down to be burned for the building of forts but also to erect towns and cities following European standards. Therefore, many of our Aruban mangrove trees were cut down, reducing the growing production of oysters drastically.

If this small industry had not been destroyed and if it had been well cared for, it could have kept its good source of profit both then and now. At that time, it was a very famous industry since our harvested oysters tasted way better and were much larger than those from Curacao and the rest of the Caribbean islands.

Large quantities of oysters grew among the roots of the mangroves and could be seen even at the bottom of the sea from branches hanging in the water. Only a few branches needed to be cut or lifted to obtain an abundant supply of oysters.

The number of shells they collected depended on the tide and the time they spent in the mangroves (generally five to six hours a day). After filling their baskets one shell at a time, they cleaned their catch and were ready to market. Although collecting mangrove oysters is not an easy task since you must immerse yourself in the mud up to your

waist, looking for them between the cracks, and also being very alert to insect bites, getting trapped between the roots, and being bitten by certain animals such as snakes that are hidden among the tree branches and roots, oysters continue to be a source of income for many and different coastal communities around the world. The disappearance of mangroves would be the end of life in coastal regions that totally depend on them.

So if you are interested in really getting to know all about your travel destination: the flora, fauna, geology, history, and autochthonous art, as well as the true identity of the island, book a visit to Etnia Nativa, a unique native gem! Let Anthony, our newspaper's acclaimed cultural columnist, guide and lecture you regarding the most interesting and revealing stories about Aruba's undiscovered native ethnicity, an adventure beyond beaches and tourist traps. Visit his magnificent dwelling that integrates natural and reused materials, bursting with culture and island heritage, and you'll love our island beyond beaches!

Appointments and confirmations through WhatsApp +297 592 2702 or etnianaativa03@gmail.com



National Park Arikok: Aruba's biggest nature conservation



The National Park Arikok comprises almost 18 % of the island. Its rugged terrain, desert-like hills filled with tall cacti, breathtaking coastline and protected local flora and fauna welcome you to be explored. There are numerous animals to discover, for example the sea turtle who lays his eggs on the park's beaches.

The national park Arikok takes you on a memorable journey of the islands past offering unique geological, cultural and historical sites. These can all be enjoyed and explored either on your own or during guided tours. A wide variety of educational and informative programs and fun activities is available.

Did you know that four of the in total seven species of sea turtle lay their eggs on Aruba's beaches? In the national park, a Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) keeps a strict eye on a very special event taking place below on the beach: a majestic Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) heads back to sea after laying her eggs, while another nest laid 2 months ago by the same female hatches—a very rare occurrence of daytime nesting and hatching. Sea turtles prefer nesting in the cool and dark hours of the night. And hatchlings usually wait for the cue of cooling surface sand before emerging.

Nature Conservation

The protected area of National Park Arikok was of-

ficially established in 2000. Arikok National Park is a 34 square kilometers (7907 acres) of natural area, located at the north-eastern part of Aruba which contains examples of most of the island's flora and fauna against a backdrop of great geological complexity. We are proud to state that approximately 18% of the total land area of Aruba is assigned as a National Park, to protect and preserve the flora, fauna, geology and historical remains present within Arikok National Park.

The Landscape

There is a great geological variety within the park. The main aspects are the rough hills of the volcanic Aruba lava formation, the mysterious rocks of the batholithic quartz-diorite/tonalite, and the limestone rocks from fossilized coral. The two tallest hills on the island are situated within the park. Jamanota hill 188 meters (617 ft) and Arikok hill 176 meters (577 ft), from which the name of the park is derived.

The line of the permanently wind-and-wave beaten North Coast is broken by several bays (boca's). Most of them are small yet impressive inlets at the mouth of dry riverbeds. Some of these bays (boca's) are spectacular sights, adorned with white, sandy beaches and sand dunes, as is the case at Boca Prins and Dos Playa.

Arikok is also home to Conchi, Aruba's most important natural attraction; also

known as The Natural Pool. The journey to the Pool is and adventure by itself and only possible by foot, horse, ATV or 4x4 vehicle.

Cultural and Historical components

There are a number of sites within the park that attest to the history of Aruba. The Caquetío Indians left rock paintings in Cunucu Arikok and Fontein Cave. The bird drawing in the park logo is a copy of one of these historical artistic expressions.

Old plantation (Cunucus) sites tell the story of an active yet challenging agricultural past.

These Cunucus were also residential areas for the few families that worked the land. These families found



ways to survive in the difficult conditions, and were able to erect their homes with materials found in the area. Two of these adobe houses have been restored. Park rangers are learning many of the old building techniques in order to preserve this unique Aruban mud-house. At Cunucu Arikok and near Plantation Prins you can find these adobe houses.

Park Management

For the management of the park, a dedicated foundation "Fundacion Parke Nacional Arikok" (FPNA), known today as the Aruba National Park Foundation was established in July 2003. In February 2017, mangrove and wetland RAMSAR site #198 Spanish Lagoon was annexed to Arikok National Park due to its importance as a feeding and breeding

area for water birds and as a nursery area for a variety of marine organisms. With this addition, the areas under FPNA management increased by 70 hectares while the amount of species of flora and fauna to be conserved to over 250. On December 21st, 2018 (AB 2018 no. 77) Parke Marino Aruba – currently consisting of four marine protected areas (MPAs) – was officially established and subsequently brought under management of FPNA. In 2019 management plans will be established for the new MPAs which include: coral reefs, sea grass beds, mangrove systems, a large diversity of breeding seabirds. Parke Marino Aruba also contains potential shark nursery areas, endangered sea turtle nesting beaches and marine mammal nursery areas. □



CROSSWORD

By **THOMAS JOSEPH**



Yesterday's answer

ACROSS 46 Put into piles

1 Denali setting

7 "Like that'll happen!"

11 Soup veggie

12 Edit menu choice

13 Fries source

14 Sub-standard

15 Playground sight

17 School member

20 Himalayan land

23 — Arbor

24 Totally trusted

26 First numero

27 Road sealer

28 Cut off

29 The Empire State

31 John, to Ringo

32 Shady spot

33 Sets the price at

34 Lets in

37 Car bar

39 Philippine peninsula

43 Work the land

44 Winter dripper

45 Fall short of

DOWN

1 Swiss peak

2 Summer sign

3 Small worker

4 Secret supply

5 Tailed flier

6 Soothing plant

7 Nanny's kin

8 European flowers

9 Altar words

10 Gift tag word

16 Long-legged bird

17 Animal life

18 Central about

19 Projectiles in a winter battle

21 Downloadable read

22 Printing goofs

24 Squall

25 Simple card game

30 Mountain calls

33 Moving about

35 Long-plumed bird

36 Meal in a shell

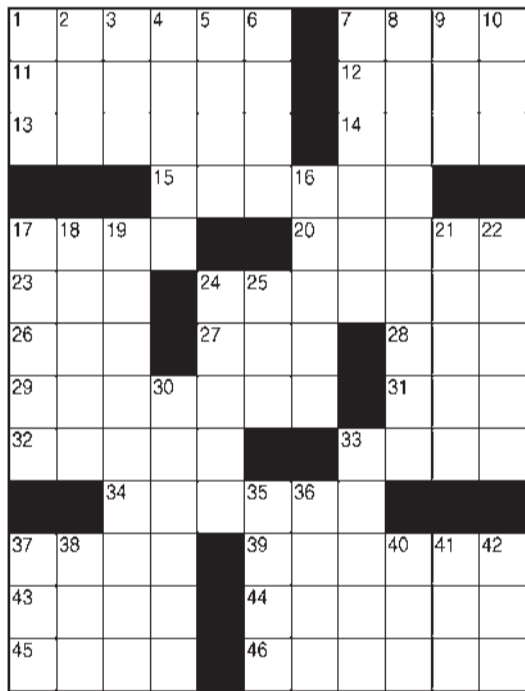
37 Cash dispenser

38 Clock numeral

40 Play part

41 Pub order

42 Homer's neighbor



AXYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

12-20

CRYPTOQUOTE

CLHXPBQVMC QGM WGMJJS

WQJJMGLC MJNDMF RL

XQJMG'C FGMQKC. — QLJDHLS

J. DRLNVC

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: BLESSED IS THE SEASON WHICH ENGAGES THE WHOLE WORLD IN A CONSPIRACY OF LOVE. — HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

Millennial Money: 5 financial New Year's resolutions for 2024



The likeness of Benjamin Franklin is seen on U.S. \$100 bills, Thursday, July 14, 2022, in Marple Township, Pa.

Associated Press

CHANELLE BESSETTE of Nerd-Wallet

The new year is upon us, and it's a great time to plan for your financial future. Here are five financial resolutions to consider for 2024.

1. GET A HIGH-INTEREST SAVINGS ACCOUNT

Interest rates are still high on savings accounts right now, especially high-yield online savings accounts. Some accounts are offering more than 5% annual percentage yield, which is 10 times more than the national average on savings accounts. Take advantage of this "free" money by opening a new account with a high rate or upgrading your current one. Just make sure you avoid fees as much as possible, and choose a bank or credit union that is easy for you to access, either through remote customer service or in person.

2. FOCUS ON STUDENT LOAN REPAYMENT

For many, student loan payments resumed in 2023. If you're feeling anxious or uncertain about how much you owe, it's best to face the numbers head-on

and see if there's any way you can reduce your payments. For example, if you earn less money now than you did before student loan payments were paused, then updating your income in your student loan portal may change the amount of your income-driven repayment. There's another way you might be able to reduce your payment if you're on an income-driven repayment plan: If you have a retirement fund, you may want to consider putting some money away as a way to reduce your student loan payment.

"If you put your money in a pre-tax retirement account, that lowers your taxable income for the year," says Jen Mayer, an accredited financial counselor and founder of the Brooklyn, New York-based firm Fully Funded. "The percentage that you're paying for income-driven repayment is going to be lower."

3. BUILD YOUR FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND SET SOME GOALS

Though personal finance isn't a standard part of an American education, there are plenty of ways to

learn more about budgeting, saving and investing. Whether you browse reputable sites online, check out finance books from your library, or talk to a certified financial planner or other licensed expert, there are lots of people who are eager to impart their financial know-how. As you learn more about personal finance, you might find yourself getting inspired to create your own financial goals. Perhaps you want to retire early, save for a down payment on a house or build a healthy emergency fund. Once you've nailed down your goals, you can determine how much money you'll need, then set a timeline for saving it.

4. TRY USING AI FOR YOUR FINANCES

In 2023, artificial intelligence chatbots such as ChatGPT and Bard became popular tools for research and advice. In 2024, you can experiment with using them for your finances. You can give a bot specific prompts, such as "My salary is \$50,000, and I want to save \$5,000 by the end of the year. How can I do that?" and it can do the math for you, calculating what you need to save and suggesting how to cut back on different expenses. You can also instruct a chatbot to find you good deals for things like groceries, school supplies, gifts and more. Just remember that AI pulls information from various sources, and those sources may not always be accurate. Be sure to double-check any information you receive by doing the math yourself, checking with an expert or going to a reputable website to learn more.

5. SET UP RECURRING DONATIONS TO A NONPROFIT

Recurring donations provide reliable income to nonprofit organizations, which allows them to plan their budgets more easily. If you're interested in setting up recurring donations for a particular nonprofit, there are several ways you can do this. □

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At least 100 elephants die in drought-stricken Zimbabwe park, a grim sign of El Nino, climate change

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — At least 100 elephants have died in Zimbabwe's largest national park in recent weeks because of drought, their carcasses a grisly sign of what wildlife authorities and conservation groups say is the impact of climate change and the El Nino weather phenomenon. Authorities warn that more could die as forecasts suggest a scarcity of rains and rising heat in parts of the southern African nation including Hwange National Park. □



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Auto pioneer Enzo Ferrari gets a solid biopic but it doesn't make the heart race

By **MARK KENNEDY**
AP Entertainment Writer
Napoleon Bonaparte.
 Leonard Bernstein. Willy Wonka. Aquaman there are a ton of Guy Movie Heroes out there as 2023 ends. And yet up zooms another in "Ferrari."

Director Michael Mann has put his stylish spotlight on yet one more stoic, brilliant and broken uber-masculine dudes, Enzo Ferrari. The movie is set during a turbulent few months in 1957 when the Italian auto-maker's private and professional lives threatened to careen out of control.

It's a solid vehicle but it will leave you, well, unmoved. "Ferrari" has excellent work by Adam Driver as Ferrari, aged up two decades with grey at his temple, sunglasses clamped to his head at all times and a frosty demeanor. When we meet him, Ferrari is at a crossroads. He needs to ramp up production and sell hundreds of cars a year or risk bankrupting the company that he and his wife, Laura, have built from the ashes of world war.

Enzo and Laura are still recovering from losing a son to muscular dystrophy but she doesn't know that Mr. Ferrari has another family a girlfriend (Shailene Woodley, great but wrong here) who has given birth to a se-



This image released by Neon shows Adam Driver as Enzo Ferrari in a scene from "Ferrari."

Associated Press

cret son. Laura is played by Penélope Cruz, whose grief is profound, her eyes heavy and her gait plodding, possibly overacting. Laura knows her husband is a cad but the rule is he must be home before the maid arrives with the morning coffee. It's a signal that the surfaces of things matter. The private and public lives of Ferrari will ultimately come to a head with the results of the treacherous 1,000-mile race across Italy, the Mille Miglia. If Ferrari has a good showing and embarrasses competitor

Maserati he can fill orders and everything is buono. If not, disastro. Most of Mann's toolkit is here slick and moody camerawork, a poetic surrounding and heightened use of music, even the car porn of "Miami Vice." But "Ferrari" despite Mann's leaning on Italian opera fails to ignite. One scene split between high Mass while simultaneously drivers zip through a track doesn't work no matter how high the volume is pushed. Part of the problem is Troy Kennedy Martin's script, which tries to have it both

ways, a domestic drama and also some kinetic, superb race scenes, with thick metal gears scraping, engines roaring and brave goggle-wearing drivers risking their necks at 130 mph. Ferrari himself is on the sidelines, barking orders, and so he's lost in the second half, while we're never really invested in the five drivers he has sent out to represent the brand. Distance is a strange part of the movie and viewers will fight to find a heart in the cool elegance. Driver does the best an actor can to reveal the warmth inside Ferrari, who

seems most vulnerable alone in the crypt of his son. Outside, he screams things like "I must have total control" and demands his drivers have "deadly passion." The movie tends to lose itself maybe fetishize Italian artistry: tailored shirts, fountain pens, curving exhaust manifolds, cappuccino cups and the gloriousness of Italy's cobble-street cities.

Over it all hangs loss sons, brothers and drivers die so that fresh deaths are almost run-of-the-mill. Ferrari doesn't miss a beat when he loses a key employee; he hires another even before the body is cold. "We all know that death is nearby," he says.

But the viewer is not so callous and a horrific event during the big race unmoors the movie. The end drifts off unresolved and tragically rerouted, it's engine broken. Failure has been snatched from the jaws of victory.

The fact that we know the future of Ferrari it will produce graceful, expensive roadsters lusted after and insulted in equal turns takes away some of the jeopardy. It's also hard to root for a rich CEO with a mistress. If anything, this is a movie that will make you hit the gas a little harder coming home. □



Russian American writer Masha Gessen, poses for a photo after receiving the Hannah Arendt Prize. in event room F61, in Bremen, Germany, Saturday, Dec. 16, 2023.

Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — The Russian-American writer Masha Gessen received a Ger-

man literary prize Saturday in a ceremony that was delayed and scaled down in

Author receives German prize in scaled-down format after comparing Gaza to Nazi-era ghettos

reaction to an article comparing Gaza to Nazi German ghettos. The comparison in a recent New Yorker article was viewed as controversial in Germany, where government authorities strongly support Israel as a form of remorse and responsibility after Adolf Hitler's Germany murdered up to 6 million Jews in the Holocaust. Gessen, who was born Jewish in the Soviet Union, is critical of Israel's treatment of

Palestinians. Reaction to the article comes as German society grapples with the fallout from the Israel-Hamas war, with both pro-Palestinian protests and pro-Israel demonstrations taking place in past weeks. German leaders have repeatedly stressed their support for the country's Jews and for Israel as they have denounced antisemitic incidents. Gessen was originally due to receive the Hannah

Arendt Prize for Political Thought on Friday in the city hall of Bremen, in northwest Germany, but the sponsoring organization, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, and the Senate of the city of Bremen withdrew from the ceremony.

It took place instead in a different location Saturday with about 50 guests crowded into a small event room and with police security, the German news agency dpa reported. □

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Rodgers' return will come next season with Jets out of playoff hunt and QB not 100% healthy

By DENNIS WASZAK Jr.
AP Pro Football Writer

Aaron Rodgers' quest to make an improbable return this season for the New York Jets appears over.

The 40-year-old quarterback said during his weekly appearance on "The Pat McAfee Show" on Tuesday he's not yet 100% healthy in his recovery from a torn left Achilles tendon and is still a few weeks away.

"I'm not going to slow my rehab down," Rodgers said. "I'm going to keep attacking it every single day. But now without a timetable to come back, obviously we can be as smart as we need to be."

Rodgers said if the Jets had won last Sunday at Miami and remained in the post-season hunt, he "would have pushed it as far as I could this week" even at less than fully healthy to be ready to play against Washington on Sunday. But the Jets were routed 30-0 and eliminated from the playoff hunt for the 13th straight year.

"If I was 100% today, I'd be definitely pushing to play," Rodgers said. "But the fact is I'm not."

Rodgers never firmly said he won't play this season, but strongly indicated that is the case.

"I think the whole time it's been, you know, hoping



New York Jets quarterback Aaron Rodgers looks up during the second half of an NFL football game against the Miami Dolphins, Sunday, Dec. 17, 2023, in Miami Gardens, Fla.

Associated Press

that we're still in it because it was unrealistic to think that I would be 100% to be medically cleared at any point during the regular season," Rodgers said. "I do feel like in the next three to four weeks, it would be very possible to get to 100%, but obviously not there."

"And so the conversation was away from 100% medical clearance to a willingness to play. And that's never been a problem for me."

The Jets opened the 21-day practice window for Rodgers on Nov. 29 and have until Wednesday to

activate him from the injured reserve list. That still remains a possibility, but he would then take a spot on the active 53-man roster. Otherwise, the quarterback will revert to IR for the rest of the season. Rodgers still needs to be medically cleared to fully practice something that seemed to be a possibility.

He has been participating in individual and 7-on-7 drills while also taking snaps from under center and jogging, but hasn't yet done 11-on-11 team drills.

Rodgers tore his Achilles tendon just four snaps into

his debut with the Jets on Sept. 11, moments after he jogged onto the field while carrying an American flag in front of a jam-packed MetLife Stadium.

"That won't be the lasting image that you see of me in a Jets uniform," he said. "There's going to be a lot more amazing things to come."

Rodgers added he doesn't think next season will be his last in the NFL, saying he always wanted to play at least two years for the Jets and this season was "kind of a lost year."

He said he has full faith

in general manager Joe Douglas, coach Robert Saleh and offensive coordinator Nathaniel Hackett, and the team needs to "reload" and not "rebuild" during the offseason.

"I think the future is very bright," Rodgers said. "We're going to rise again and it's going to be exciting."

Rodgers had surgery two days after his injury and was trying to have the fastest return to the playing field from a torn Achilles tendon of any known professional athlete. Wednesday will mark 14 weeks since Rodgers' surgery, which reportedly included a "speed bridge" an internal brace on the Achilles tendon procedure that helps expedite the healing process.

He thinks his comeback can serve as an example for players who suffer a similar injury, which traditionally has taken most about nine months from which to heal. "I think that there's hope that if you were to have an injury in the offseason, that it's not out of the question to be ready for Week 1 and definitely not out of the question to be ready for the season," Rodgers said. "So hopefully this isn't looked at as kind of a one-year kind of loss of a year death sentence moving forward." □

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Long losing streaks are uncomfortable for NBA players

By **PAT GRAHAM**
 AP Sports Writer

Victor Wembanyama has adjusted to many things food, culture, double teams since the top pick's arrival with the San Antonio Spurs.

There's just no getting accustomed to all the losing. Pick an NBA player's name, any name, and they're not hard-wired for skids. Players like Wembanyama have typically always been on winning teams before coming to the league, not ones that stack up defeats at historic rates. For Wembanyama, along with youngsters like Cade Cunningham and Ausar Thompson in Detroit and Bilal Coulibaly of Washington, losing has become part of their NBA education.

Misery does love company, and the Pistons, who lost their 24th straight game Monday night, have some in the Spurs and Wizards. Despite the presence of Wembanyama, the Spurs have dropped 19 of 20, while the Wizards are in the midst of losing 17 of 19.

"Sometimes, you'll be in a game and maybe think about the losing streak and causes you to do a little extra or just do something you wouldn't normally do," Thompson recently said. "Panic a little bit."

Thompson's certainly not used to this. He won a state title in high school, along with two titles with Overtime Elite, a professional basketball league based in Atlanta that's opening another door to the pros for talented young players.

Now, he's trying to help a struggling Pistons team. The record for the longest losing streak within a single season is shared by the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers and



Detroit Pistons' Cade Cunningham fouls Milwaukee Bucks' MarJon Beauchamp during the first half of an NBA basketball game Saturday, Dec. 16, 2023, in Milwaukee.

2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers, who both dropped 26 consecutive games. The 76ers also had a 28-game losing streak that started in the 2014-15 season and carried over to 2015-16.

"It's just a miserable existence," said NBA on TNT analyst Greg Anthony, who was a member of the 1995-96 Vancouver Grizzlies team that dropped 23 straight contests. "Your food doesn't taste as good. You don't sleep as well. There's a lot of stress and anxiety. It wears on you, because everybody in your world knows you're going through it."

"The city knows it, the country knows it, the entire league. You're the butt of jokes. As a competitor, that is a really difficult experience to have to go through."

The Pistons (2-25), Wizards (4-22) and Spurs (4-21) may have scuffling in common. But not all rebuilds are the

same. Detroit has an array of first-round talent, and the Spurs boast Wembanyama (he's averaging 19 points and 11 rebounds). Washington, meanwhile, is generating headlines as much for its moves off the court possibly relocating out of the District of Columbia as the mounting losses. On the floor, the Wizards are trying to build around Coulibaly, Jordan Poole and Kyle Kuzma, the veteran forward who won an NBA title with James and the Lakers. Other single-digit win teams include Portland (6-19), Memphis (6-19, but Ja Morant returns Tuesday after a 25-game suspension) and Charlotte (7-18).

It's a race to the bottom right now, with Detroit in the driver's seat and no Wembanyama awaiting in the 2024 draft.

"Your whole career, your whole life as an athlete, you're always in the mindset of winning," Anthony

said. "And typically, most guys have been on good teams where if you do certain things, well, you're going to have a chance to win. But when you get in those kinds of situations, where you don't have control over your own destiny in a specific game, that can really try you and challenge you, and everybody involved. It can just be a really ... poisonous existence."

The Pistons had all the signs of a team prepared to improve on their 17-65 mark from a season ago. Cunningham was back from shin surgery, they landed Thompson and Marcus Sasser in the most recent draft and had a year of growth from Jaden Ivey, the 2022 fifth overall pick out of Purdue. They also brought in veteran coach Monty Williams.

Instead, it's been loss after loss after loss, etc. "You talk to people that are

around our team, they're not laughing, giggling and having a ball. They hate it," Williams recently said of the losing. "But when we show up in the gym the next day, the guys are wide-eyed. They're looking at me for answers. They come in and work hard.

"We've just hit an unbelievably tough stretch of basketball."

Anthony knows the feeling. He was once in the middle of an historical skid, too. This after winning a national championship at UNLV. This after helping New York Knicks to the 1994 NBA Finals, where they lost in seven games to Hakeem Olajuwon and the Rockets. As part of the 1995 expansion draft, Anthony was picked by the Vancouver Grizzlies (now Memphis).

That first season, Anthony experienced a losing streak that started with a loss on Feb. 16, 1996, to Atlanta, and didn't end until the Grizzlies knocked off Kevin Garnett and the Minnesota Timberwolves on April 23.

"In a weird way, that was like winning a playoff game," Anthony recalled. "It was a really, really big deal. You can't even describe the relief that one feels having gone through that."

Wembanyama almost felt like the weight had been lifted when the Spurs saw their 18-game losing streak end with a win over LeBron James and the Lakers last Friday. On Sunday, though, they lost 146-110 to New Orleans.

The Spurs are young and bumps are part of the journey.

"It might explain it but it doesn't mean it's OK," Wembanyama said. □